

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 11

THE NEW REPUBLIC
26 May 1986

WHITE HOUSE WATCH

LEAK SOUP

NOTHING extraordinary on the Washington news front on Tuesday, April 29. Only the normal volume of leaks. The Associated Press, quoting "Pentagon sources," reported that the administration had dispatched a third aircraft carrier to the Mediterranean, where Libya's been acting up. The *New York Times* disclosed a foreign policy zag by the Reagan administration, namely a plan to terminate the American military alliance with New Zealand if that country bars visits by nuclear-armed or nuclear-powered ships. This information was attributed to unnamed "State Department officials." The *Wall Street Journal*, meanwhile, reported that a confidential Pentagon study had raised doubts about the cost-effectiveness of the Lavi, the new jet fighter that Israel is developing with U.S. financing.

Oh, yes. Tuesday, April 29, was also the day that Michael E. Pillsbury got canned as assistant under secretary of defense for policy planning. The firing offense: leaking sensitive national security information to the press. Pillsbury was accused of informing the *Washington Post* and columnists Evans and Novak of the administration's decision, privately reached and never announced, to send American-made Stinger missiles to anticommunist rebels in Angola and Afghanistan. Defense officials told the *New York Times* that Pillsbury had flunked a lie detector test when asked about the Stinger leak. The Pentagon was feeling downright huffy. "Senior policymakers had become increasingly irritated by the appearance of information in the press about Libya and a large variety of the administration's covert programs," the Times was told.

President Reagan rails against leakers at his nationally televised press conferences. Nevertheless, the firing of Pillsbury is world-class hypocrisy. I haven't the slightest idea whether Pillsbury leaked or not. But suppose he did. If every leaker in the administration were to get the Pillsbury treatment, Reagan would have to fire practically his entire Cabinet and senior staff, and possibly resign himself. No administration really opposes all unofficial, anonymous disclosure of government information ("leaks"). That includes this one, which wants greatly expanded use of lie detectors to prevent leaking. What every administration opposes are leaks that don't serve its own purposes.

If the political system in the Soviet Union is built on lies, as Reagan is fond of reminding us, his own administration is built on leaks. O.K., O.K. Not entirely built on leaks, but an incredible amount of information is conveyed to the American public through leaks. And guess who does most of the leaking, especially of national security information such as an aircraft carrier movement, a policy shift on New Zealand, or an evaluation of a jet fighter? Senior officials at the White House, Pentagon, State Department, and CIA,

that's who. These are the same folks who are now "increasingly irritated" by leaks about Libya and covert aid to anticommunist guerrillas.

The *Washington Post* reported May 7 that CIA director William Casey had threatened it with prosecution under a 1950 law against revealing secret codes and other "communications intelligence activity" if it published a planned article about the CIA. He threatened criminal prosecution of four other news organizations as well under this rarely used law. In 1983 the administration issued a national security directive requiring every federal employee with a security clearance to submit to lie detector tests. Last year the administration used espionage laws to convict and imprison a naval intelligence analyst, Samuel Loring Morison, for leaking satellite photos to a British magazine. Yet throughout this whole campaign, high officials of this same administration have been leaking the very same sort of material.

PRESIDENTS LEAK. Jimmy Carter once held an off-the-record session with a dozen reporters under a tree on the South Lawn of the White House. It was hot and lemonade was served. Of course, nothing is ever really off-the-record, as Carter had to know, and all the tidbits he dispensed got out quickly. Reagan's tack is different. He takes secrets of the highest security classification and reveals them in his speeches. In a talk on Grenada, he used satellite photographs to show ominous military construction. More recently, Reagan ignored the objections of the intelligence community and announced how the United States got wind of the Libyan terrorist scheming that culminated in the Berlin disco bombing on April 5. It was through a radio intercept. This let the Libyans know we'd cracked their code. It alerted the Soviets, Syrians, East Germans, and everyone else too. My guess is they piped down fast, a large loss for American intelligence gathering. Reagan's own leak about a radio intercept is a perfect example of the kind of "communications intelligence activity" protected by the law that the administration wants to use to prosecute the Washington Post.

There are three types of leaks—policy leaks, what might be called anti-policy leaks, and old-fashioned loose-tongue leaks. Policy leaks are handled by top officials or by their surrogates. These leaks are designed to promote an administration policy. High government officials spend hours every day plotting how to affect the "spin," or presentation, of news stories. The strategic leak is a key part of "spin control." When Reagan decided to say how we learned about the Libyan plans, he did so to buttress his decision to bomb Libya. After Reagan decided in April to continue adherence to the SALT II treaty by scrapping two Poseidon submarines, several reporters at the State Department were quickly informed. There was no public

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announcement, only leaked information, just as in the Stinger case in which Pillsbury is accused. The same was true of the shift in policy toward New Zealand.

YES, THERE'S a legitimate distinction between leaks of delicate national security information and leaks of less sensitive stuff. But the biggest jeopardizer of national security is the administration itself. In the week before the bombing raid on Libya, the administration fed story after story to reporters about the military options under consideration. The television networks had time to produce fancy graphics to depict each option. If this didn't give Muammar al-Qaddafi the idea that something was up, nothing would have.

The classic example of a vital government secret is information about military movements—troop deployments, plane departures, warship formations. When the press disclosed last summer that the anti-commando Delta Force had been sent to the Mediterranean during the TWA 847 hijacking, the administration was beside itself. That leak was apparently unauthorized. Ten months later the administration leaked word that aircraft carriers are massing again in the Med. This was authorized, the aim being to tell Qaddafi not to try anything.

One variation of the policy leak is a Reagan administration specialty. This is the more-in-sorrow-than-in-anger leak by a top official to the effect that some subordinate embroiled in controversy had better pack his bags. The drift is usually that while the case against the subordinate is flimsy, he or she ought to resign pronto to avoid hurting the president. This line was leaked to reporters at the White House in the cases of National Security Adviser Richard Allen and Anne Burford, the administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency. They both eventually quit. In Allen's case, a twist was added. It was leaked that First Lady Nancy Reagan was upset by the controversy over Allen and wanted him out. But an official doesn't have to be accused of wrongdoing to get this treatment. Well before William Clark quit as national security adviser in 1983, officials at the White House were systematically trashing him in the press. The same has been happening for a year or more to Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger.

It's the anti-policy leaks that drive Reagan and his closest advisers nuts. That story raising questions about the Israeli jet fighter was an example of an anti-policy leak: the likely source was Pentagon officials who object to American funding of a foreign plane. As budget director, David Stockman was adept at putting out embarrassing deficit projections and fueling momentum for a tax increase. He did so "on background," which is the ground rule under which officials often speak to reporters. This means the information can be attributed to an "administration official" or "White House official" or "Pentagon source." There is also "deep background," under which no attribution at all can be used. This leads to awkward phrases like "it was understood that . . ." or "The Times has learned . . ." Stockman exploited these conventions of Washington

journalism to air his dissident policy advice. So have officials who want Reagan to negotiate limits on Star Wars. Before last fall's summit, they leaked stories that Star Wars was negotiable at Geneva, hoping to create pressure for exactly that outcome. Didn't work.

Loose-tongue leaks, where the motive has nothing to do with either promoting or subverting official policy, are probably the most common of all. These leaks happen mostly because people like to talk, and some journalists are skilled at exploiting this human foible. Loose-tongue leaks have even come my way. As a reporter for the *Washington Star* in 1973, just elevated from the local staff, I was assigned to the Senate Watergate hearings. The first day I dropped by the office of a senator's press secretary. I scarcely knew the guy, but he gave me a copy of secret testimony by a Nixon aide. All I'd done was ask about staff interviews of White House officials.

Most officials are honest. If you ask them a question, they'll answer it. Then, too, talking "on background" about vital matters of state makes people feel important. Sometimes officials are eager to curry a reporter's favor, though I can't remember this happening to me. And sometimes they want to take a poke at a rival in government, or simply at someone they don't like. This is how *Newsweek* broke the story that Mike Deaver, then a White House official, was using diplomatic credentials to buy a BMW in Germany at a cut-rate price while advancing a Reagan trip to Europe. A State Department minion rattled.

THERE'S A RISK for journalists in exaggerating the importance of leaks. Reporters can be fooled into thinking they're getting a hot tip when they aren't. In 1982 a White House official invited me to lunch. Hmmm, I thought, he's got something to leak. To my delight, he told me about plans for a new presidential commission to investigate organized crime. I later learned this had been reported a week before. I'd missed the story. A worse situation is when officials, eager to show they're in the stream of knowledge, tell you more than they know. Once an official in a position to know told me that a controversial U.S. attorney was not going to be reappointed. I reported that. It turned out that while the official was in a position to know, he didn't. The prosecutor was reappointed.

Pillsbury's problem, assuming he leaked, wasn't that he was wrong about the Stingers. His problem was that he was right. In his case, this makes the leak all the more innocuous. Who, after all, was the information being hidden from? The Angolans and Afghans and Soviets and Cubans would soon know the truth anyway. They'd see the Stingers being used against their aircraft. As with most things the government would like to keep secret, the concern was how the information would affect the political debate in this country, rather than how it might affect our military goals abroad.

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Anyway, reporters covering the wars in Angola and Afghanistan also would have learned about the Stingers once they were put into use. So what was Pillsbury's crime? He spoke too soon, and without official authorization. The day he departed the Defense Department, I chatted with a young conservative who had just returned from conferring in Angola with the anticommunist rebels. Had the Stingers gotten there? I asked. Oh sure, he said, without hesitation. You couldn't miss them.

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